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What is the Relationship Between the Creation Accounts in Genesis 1 and 2?

By **J. Richard Middleton**

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The question of how we read the Genesis creation narratives is particularly pressing in a scientific age. At first glance, what the sciences tell us about the size and age of the universe and the evolutionary origin of humanity stands in clear contradiction to how these realities are portrayed in the opening chapters of Genesis.

There have been various approaches to addressing these seeming contradictions. On the one hand, some skeptics simply dismiss the Bible because its portrayal of reality doesn't fit that of modern science. On the other hand, many Christians assume that the Bible and science must be shown to agree, which often ends up dismissing any science (for example, evolution) that seems to contradict the Bible; but sometimes this approach results in efforts to make the Bible anticipate modern science (which is anachronistic).

But before considering any supposed contradictions between science and the Bible, we need to deal with the difficulties in the Genesis text itself. The careful reader will notice that there are significant differences between the creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2.

Let's first look at the evident differences between these two creation accounts. Then I will suggest how we might understand the relationship of Genesis 1 (technically, Gen 1:1–2:3) to Genesis 2 (beginning at 2:4) as the opening chapters of Scripture,

without imposing modern ideas on this ancient text. My purpose here is to help Christians read these chapters for their theological and ethical claims on us as we seek to be faithful to God in the contemporary world.

Different names for God

First, we should note that the creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2 consistently use different names for God. Whereas the first account uses the generic term *'elohîm* (Hebrew for "God") right up to Gen 2:3, the second account uses the compound name YHWH *'elohîm*, starting in Gen 2:4 (this continues until Gen 3:24, which is the formal end of the Garden narrative about human creation and the origin of sin).[1] This compound name allows the Garden narrative to serve as a link between the opening creation account of Gen 1:1–2:3 (which introduces the Creator-God) and the post-Garden narrative (which predominantly uses YHWH, the unique covenant name for the God of Israel).

Differences in style, scope, and organization

The two creation accounts also have different literary styles, scope, and organizational principles. Genesis 1 describes the creation of the entire cosmos (heaven and earth) over six days, with repetition and patterning, climaxing with God's rest on the seventh day. By contrast, Genesis 2 (the first chapter of the Garden story) is more straightforwardly a narrative in the formal sense, with a series of tensions and resolutions. And in contrast to the wide-angle view of Genesis 1, which surveys the cosmos as a whole, Genesis 2 zooms in telescopically on humanity on the earth.

Different evaluations of the stages of creation

The two accounts also have differing evaluations of the various stages of creation. Thus Genesis 1 is peppered with statements at multiple stages of the creative process that "God saw that it was good" (Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25), and ultimately that it was "very good" (Gen 1:31). By way of contrast, at one point in Genesis 2, we find YHWH God saying, "It is *not good* that the man should be alone" (Gen 2:18); this specifies a plot tension in the narrative that is resolved by the creation of the woman (Gen 2:21–22). We are clearly in a different literary world from Genesis 1.

Different order of creative events

Perhaps most significantly for those attempting to harmonize Genesis with science, there is a different order of creative events in each chapter. To begin with, the two creation accounts open with different (indeed, opposite) descriptions of the initial state of the world. Whereas Genesis 1 starts with the earth inundated with water (Gen 1:2), so that God has to separate the waters for the dry land to emerge (Gen 1:9), Genesis 2 begins with the earth as a dry wilderness (Gen 2:5), until a stream or mist emerges to provide water (Gen 2:6).

Then, attending to just those creative events mentioned in both chapters, the following divergences are evident. Genesis 1 has water first, then land, followed by plants, animals, and finally humans (*'adam*, consisting in male and female together). By contrast, Genesis 2 begins with the existence of land, then comes water, followed by a human (*'adam*, later specified as a man, *'iš*), then plants, animals, and finally a woman (*'iššâ*).

How many humans did God create?

We should also take special note of how many humans God created. While we often think of the first humans as a primordial couple, we need to balance the picture in Genesis 2 with that of Genesis 1, where God creates not individuals, but

population groups to fill various niches—including flying creatures in the sky, swimming things in the water, and then on the land both animals and humans (the latter designated by the collective noun *'adam*). Christians only read this account of human creation as an original couple because we retroject the account from Genesis 2 back into chapter 1. But we need to respect the different portrayals of creation in each account.[2]

Which creation account is scientifically (or "literally") true?

These divergences between the creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2 suggest that these texts are *not* teaching science; for then we would need to ask *which* account is scientifically true (they cannot both be true at a scientific level). But even beyond the question of science, we should not take these texts as "literal" in the modern sense of requiring each detail in the narrative to correspond to realities in the external world.[3] Rather, some ancient biblical editor, fully aware of their differences, put them side-by-side as the opening of the book of Genesis. And we confess that this editorial work was inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit.

Possible approaches to reading Genesis 1 and 2 together

Genesis 1 and 2 have been put together for a reason—despite their divergences. But what's the reason? How *should* we think of the relationship of Genesis 1 to Genesis 2?

One approach is to think of these two differing depictions of creation as balancing each other. Whereas the first account (Gen 1) pictures God as more transcendent, speaking creation into being by his word, the second account (Gen 2) portrays God as more immanent, forming the human from the dust of the ground (like a potter working with clay), and conversing with humans. And there is certainly validity, and much to value, to this approach.

Another approach is to think of Genesis 2 as an expansion of the account of human creation on Day 6 in Genesis 1. This is also plausible, though we would still have to deal with the contradictions in the order of creation events in both accounts (particularly the creation of the man in Gen 2 before plants, animals, and the woman).

The *Tôledôt* structure of the book of Genesis

However, there is another way to think of the relationship of Genesis 1 to Genesis 2. The ancient editor of Genesis structured the entire book with the phrase: "These are the *tôledôt* of x" (found at Gen 2:4a; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10; 11:27; 25:12; 25:19; 36:1 & 9; 37:2); in each case this phrase functions as a heading for what follows.[4] The plural noun *tôledôt* derives from the verb *yalad*, meaning to give birth or bear children, thus *tôledôt* means something like "birthings" (the KJV translates it as "generations").

Given that *tôledôt* can introduce either a narrative or a genealogy (or some combination of both), perhaps the best sense of *tôledôt* is "developments." That is, this is what *developed out* of the person named in the heading (either their descendents in a genealogy or a particular descendent who is the prime character in the narrative that ensues). "These are the *tôledôt* of Terah" (Gen 11:27) is thus primarily a story about Abraham, who is Terah's son (Abraham, we might say, *developed out of* Terah).

Genesis 1:1–2:3 as the prologue to the book of Genesis

Gen 2:4a (the first *tôledôt* statement, standing at the division between the two creation accounts) introduces what is primarily a narrative unit, though with some genealogical information (Gen 2:4–4:26). What is unusual about this *tôledôt* introduction is that it doesn't name a *person* as the progenitor of what follows, but rather *the creation itself*: "These are the *tôledôt* of the heavens and the earth when they were created" (Gen 2:4a).

Given the structure of the book of Genesis, it makes sense to think of Gen 1:1–2:3 (which comes before the first *tôledôt* heading) as the Prologue to the entire book of Genesis, setting up the initial conditions for creation (Gen 1:1–31), after which God "rests" from creating (Gen 2:1–3), having entrusted the earthly realm to humanity, whom he made in his image, and granted dominion as his stewards (Gen 1:26–28). What follows in the book of Genesis is a compressed account of human history, which developed out of the heavens and the earth.

It is significant that while God sets up the initial conditions for the world in Genesis 1, separating realms and calling creatures into existence, no created thing (with the exception of the earth in Gen 1:12) is described as actually doing anything in Genesis 1. Even humans, to whom God has entrusted dominion, do not actually govern the animals, or multiply and fill the earth in the parameters of the first creation story.

Although Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 likely had divergent origins, we can think of their current relationship as that of *call* and *response*. In Genesis 1 we find God calling the cosmos (heaven and earth, and all that is in them) into existence. Then in the rest of Genesis (beginning in Genesis 2) we have the account of what came of (or developed out of) God's initial creation, how humans responded to God's call to be his image in the world. As the first episode (Gen 2:4–4:26) of that history shows, it was a mixed bag. Humans rebelled against God's limits (seeking an inappropriate form of God-likeness) and began to do violence to each other—while still exhibiting their rule over the earth by developing various innovations (including cities, music, metal tools, etc.).

A coherent theological vision for living in God's world

If we attend to the canonical structure of Genesis (suggested by the *tôledôt* headings), we won't get sidetracked by the divergences between the creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2. Rather, we will focus on the coherent theological vision they communicate (despite their diversity) about the wisdom of God the Creator, the goodness of creation, and God's purposes for humans (both male and female) made in his image to care for the earth and develop culture in faithfulness to our calling.

Of course, we will need to read beyond the creation accounts of the first two chapters, on into the rest of Genesis. There we will find a profound analysis of how things have gone wrong through human disobedience (Gen 3–4), a disobedience in which we are all implicated. And we will come to understand that God has never given up on his creation, but has been working from the start to bring redemption, especially through the call of Abraham and his family to be a blessing to all the peoples of the earth (Gen 12:1–3)—a trajectory that culminates in the coming of the Messiah Jesus.

Before You Read ...

Dear reader,

A new poll shows that for young adults in particular, belief in God is plummeting. **From research, we know a primary driver behind a loss of faith among young people is the church's rejection of science**. To put it bluntly: Young people aren't leaving the faith *because* of science, they're leaving because t*hey've been told to choose between science and God.* That's why BioLogos exists—to show that science and faith can work hand-in-hand. And although the challenge is clearly daunting, our work is having an impact!

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Notes & References

1. While the narrator consistently refers to God as YHWH *'elohîm* , the snake refers to God simply as *'elohîm* (possibly in an attempt to create distance from the covenant God of Israel), and the woman follows suit in her response to the snake (see Gen 3:1–5).

2. Even in Genesis 2, the initial pair that God creates are described as "the human" (*ha'adam*) and "the woman" (*ha'iššâ*). "Adam" becomes a proper name only in the genealogy of Gen 5:1 and "Eve" is the name given to the woman in Gen 3:20. These names are clearly symbolic, since the name of the first man is "Human" (*'adam*) and the name of the first woman (*havvâ*) sounds like the Hebrew for "Life."

3. There is another sense of "literal," deriving from the Latin *ad literatum* ("according to the letter") that is equivalent to reading for the intention of the author, given the genre of the literature. This is what the Church Fathers, the Medieval theologians, and the Reformers meant by "literal." It means taking Genesis 1 and 2 seriously as premodern texts, which are not intending to give scientific information, but rather a theological vision of the meaning of creation.

4. Some Bibles translate *tôledôt* as "account," which isn't very specific. Others misread *tôledôt* as a conclusion not a heading (it fits as a conclusion to what came before in some cases, but not all; however, it fits as a heading to what follows in all cases).

About the Author

J. Richard Middleton

Richard Middleton (PhD Free University of Amsterdam) is Professor of Biblical Worldview and Exegesis at Northeastern Seminary (Rochester, NY) and adjunct professor of Old Testament at the Caribbean Graduate School of Theology (Kingston, Jamaica). He is past president of the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies (2019–2021) and past president of the Canadian-American Theological Association (2011–2014). He holds a BTh from Jamaica Theological Seminary and an MA in Philosophy from the University of Guelph (Canada). Middleton is the author of *Abraham's Silence: The Binding of Isaac, the Suffering of Job, and How to Talk Back to God* (Baker Academic, 2021); *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Baker Academic, 2014); and *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Brazos, 2005). He coauthored (with Brian Walsh) *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View* (IVP, 1984) and *Truth is Stranger than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (IVP, 1995), and has co-edited (with Garnett Roper) *A Kairos Moment for Caribbean Theology: Ecumenical Voices in Dialogue* (Pickwick, 2013). He has published articles on creation theology in the Old Testament, the problem of suffering, and the dynamics of human and divine power in biblical narratives. His books have been published in Korean, French, Indonesian, Spanish, and Portuguese.